The World of Foreign Books

ITALIAN BOOKS. *Surveyed by ARTHUR LIVINGSTON.*

LUCIANO ZUCCOLI'S books used to talk so easily of dukes, princes, countesses and marquises, and he seemed so familiar with that mysterious code of ethics that still rules, in novels at least, the aristocracy of Europe, that we always conceived of him as a very austere person far removed from the troubles and preoccupation of ordinary men. And we remember distinctly the thrill that came to us, some time ago, when his slender and elegant figure was pointed out to us in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, and how we followed him along the Via dei Due Macelli to a small and cheap restaurant off the Via Sistina, where for three-quarters of an hour we regaled ourselves with the spectacle of a celebrity struggling with a plate of long spaghetti.

That was before we knew what simple, genial fellows Italian celebrities as a rule are; especially when that celebrity is due, as is Luciano Zuccoli's, not to some eccentricity that serves the purposes of advertisement but to a lifelong application to an art modestly conceived and sincerely cultivated. There are, we believe, some twenty-six volumes on Luciano Zuccoli's list, not including his two latest novels, "Loredana's Affair" ("L'Amore di Loredana") and "Things Bigger Than Me" ("Le cose piu grandi di lui"). We ourselves can remember, more or less vividly, a baker's dozen of them; and our memories of Zuccoli are peculiar in one respect. Most often the student of foreign things, by a professional habit of mind, likes to rationalize the books he reads and the people he comes to know, making them fit into some general theory of the strange society whose mysteries he is trying to master. With results that are surprising. What learned articles could be written about Jack London or Upton Sinclair, once you think of those authors as representatives of American civilization or of modern ideas! With Zuccoli we have never had any such temptations. We do not recall that any one of Zuccoli's romances ever caused us a disturbing thought or prompted in us a tiring meditation. In one of his stories, perhaps, he stacks the cards against a Socialist and raises the problem of free love. In another, called the "Illustrious Unknown," he has written an amusing satire of bureaucratic mediocrity. But such lapses from pure entertainment are rare. Luciano Zuccoli has gone through his long, artistic life unconscious of everything except situation and character. He is a story teller above all else; and as a story teller he is one of the most accomplished at present writing on the Continent.

Zuccoli has been disparagingly summarized as a combination of Pittigrilli (or Invernerio) and D'Annunzio, as a writer, in other words, who aims at the pot boiling thriller disguised with this or that aesthetic pose. There is no doubt that Zuccoli can write a thriller even in the American sense of that term. "Il maleficio occulto" ("The Secret Crime") is a capital detective story that has enjoyed an undiminishing popularity in Italy over a period of twenty years. It is true also that he makes a lavish use of the aristocratic environment, frequently portraying, for the benefit of a petty bourgeois audience, characters from "high life" who affect the elegances and fads of the "best society." But there are sincerer elements than these in most of Zuccoli's novels. Imagine Italy peopled with the prototypes of the three or four hundred individualities which he has created in his work as a whole and you have as comprehensive a picture of the Italian life that was lived in the two decades before the war as any that we know.

Read "Farfui," for example. In this novel, which we regard as the most compact and sound of Zuccoli's productions, we have, if you wish, the inevitable story of passion with which the Latin best seller seems unable to dispense; and we have an analysis of the maternal instinct, where, with many Latin preconceptions and many conventional assumptions, the "mother love" motive is worked to an extreme. But we have also a skillfully executed portrayal of that middle class mentality which has been determining the course of European events for the last century quite apart from platforms and creeds.

There is, to be sure, a certain, even a large, number of people in Europe whom wealth has liberated from the struggle for existence and who are free to cultivate civilization with a perfection that the newer countries rarely know. There is also another class, the "intellectuals," who deliberately turn their backs on worldly pursuits and by dint of sheer sacrifice set themselves to the preservation and extension of culture. But there is also the "bourgeois" and the "petty bourgeois," the shop keeper and the man of affairs, who act as intermediaries between the great world that produces and the great world that consumes. These are the men of energy, of ambition, of initiative, who as failures sink to the social bottom and as successes climb to the seats of power.

Stendhal, just a hundred years ago, and looking wistfully back from Napoleon's era upon the joys of the old regime, predicted the growth of just such a class in just such a competitive world—a world in which there would be little spontaneous gayety, so absorbing would the struggle for life and power become, once equality of opportunity were a fact. For the revolution of the nineteenth century in Europe would set limitless appetites free upon a territory of limited resources. Where there would not be enough for all, the prize would go to the shrewder or to the stronger; and the rule of life would be hatred and combat.

The type of human being resulting from the fulfillment of Stendhal's penetrating guess is hardly known to newer lands like America; so much so that the term bourgeois comes to us from the jargon of Socialism, whose principle doctrine of the "class struggle" has been the most obvious of European facts during the last hundred years. Our natural resources have saved us from developing, or at least from idealizing, the maneater, the shark, the "pescecane," who, speaking in broad terms, is a typical product of the Continental business world.

One of these types we find molded in masterly fashion in "Farfui": Edoardo Falconaro is a "friend" of Lorenzo Moro, and from the latter he takes first his wife's love, then his business, and finally his life, all in a perfectly fair manner, always remaining in the right.

This bourgeois, and especially the petit bourgeois, world is the one that Zuccoli studies best. Its restless ambitions, its jealousies, its timidities, its conventions, its numberless virtues, form the background of all his best worked canvases. And it is the premise, as well, of much of Zuccoli's finer sentimentality. For, after all, what is this "situation" around which the bourgeois novel of Europe is commonly constructed? In a world where every one is competing, struggling to rise in social standing, to attain this objective or that, to make more money, gain more power, win the girl, even that a man with more power or more money is likely to capture, the individual is the important thing (Romanticism), and the individual is more often a failure than a success (Realism). One element, we believe, in determining the popularity of the unhappy ending in European literature is the spiritual necessity a competitive world feels to steel itself against succumbing and to cultivate a host of palliatives against failure. In an undeveloped semi-barbarous East (Russia) we have a sentimentality of rebellion and protest; in the decadent West, we have a sentimentality without purpose, save a mystic one; redeeming pity.

For Zuccoli's case we can illustrate with his last two novels, as well as with any others. "Loredana's Affair" is with a gentleman of the Venetian aristocracy (a picture of Venetian social life—which we find, personally, a trifle pallid—with an excursion to the Lake of Garda). This match is broken off by social pressure upon the young count and by inherent weaknesses in his own character. Conventions accordingly are saved, but at a price—the happiness of both the young people involved. Hence a poetic motive exploited with some real beauty, the sorrow that springs from the spectacle of an innocent, noble young lady faced by a life problem too great for her strength. We imagine that before the war the story would have stopped there. But the younger generation is more assertive these days. Loredana accepts the logic of events by becoming the mistress of another man.

"Things Bigger Than He" is a beautifully and delicately worked analysis of the child mind, a novel rich in undertones and not without a certain music all its own. Zuccoli outlines the process by which a child passes step by step from its early state of wonderment and of simple acceptance of the world it is living in to consciousness of responsibility and appreciation of life's bitter realities. Here the author makes a volume out of a motive that writers more often use for purposes of emotional relief—the projection of the complexity and selfishness of the adult mind upon the background of a child's innocence and literalness. Giorgio is an observing spectator and an unwitting actor in the tragedies that take place around him. In the presence of things he does not understand he creates a fanciful world of his own, making his playthings and his playmates the centers of boundless dreams. And these latter are shattered one by one by events over which, of course, the child has no control.

Now in these two latest volumes of Zuccoli we are evidently dealing with romances of the old school, with no concessions whatever to the demands and the devices of the younger generation of Italian writers; and with not the slightest move on the author's part to recognize the fact that we are living in 1922 and not in 1913. Zuccoli gives no sign of feeling that bewilderment and discouragement which one notes in many of the artists who had reached their full maturity before the war. In one important sense this is a sound and refreshing attitude; the way to produce a good art is to produce one that is consistent with itself and does not run, necessarily, after every passing fad. One does not become a modern merely by introducing a Bolshevist here and there among one's characters. Zuccoli's world is the world that existed eight years ago. He does not admit, so far as his novels go, that it has changed; and he seems to have intrenched himself against any assertion that it can possibly change.

It is for us, on the other hand, to analyze as best we can the sense of archaism and untimeliness that comes to us very forcibly from such novels as these. The point is that they do not at present harmonize with the rest of the Italian picture. First of all the spectacle of world disaster is still too fresh in our minds to give individual sorrows much relief. The fact of human unity in suffering has somehow dwarfed the personal significance of the preoccupations of the old decadent bourgeoisie. Yes, Loredana did not get a square deal! But what of it? In the second place, we have the impression that the old sentimentality of the Continental middle classes has gone for a long time, if not forever. In the old pre-war Europe it was possible to think of the social order as something fixed and eternal, its evils as irremediable as its blessings were unassailable. Tears then had value as tears, with no disturbing imperative of action. But that is no longer so. Europe is in flux.